



# MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME AND DISCRIMINATION: AN ANALYSIS

Priyambada Shah

Ph.D Scholar, Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

## ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to understand the mid-day meal scheme. The scheme launched in mid-1995 had both positive and some negative impact. Although the scheme succeeded in bringing large number of students in its ambience and retaining them in schools but in certain parts of India, it also led to 'caste based discrimination' against certain communities. It also enhanced gender equality whereby it succeeded in bringing girl child into the school, liberated working women and generated employment opportunities (as cooks). But the study showed that the caste based discrimination continued. During the meal times, the students were segregated on caste basis and the appointment of Dalits as cooks were opposed in certain areas. The study suggested that in some cases, the school became a mechanism to reinforce rather than eroding the prevalent social inequalities.

**KEY WORDS:** Mid-day meal, Right to Food, education, social inequality, discrimination.

## Introduction

Education is an important determinant of national development. It was during the 1980s and 1990s that the efforts to achieve the goal of universal elementary education got intensified. The government made interventions and launched schemes to increase the enrolment in schools. One such scheme was the 'mid-day meal'. The Government of India in mid-1995 launched a new 'centrally-sponsored scheme', the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (commonly known as Mid-day Meal Scheme). The scheme was undertaken to increase the universalization of primary education and fostering the nutritional status of children in primary school (Khera, 2006). This programme introduced the distributing free lunch in all government and government-aided primary and upper primary schools on working days. It further convinced the disadvantaged parents to send their children to schools rather than work. Therefore, the mid-day meal can be regarded as an important intervention of the government in protecting children's right to food. The scheme was to be funded by the Union government as a part of its "nutritious food programme" (The Times of India, 1 November 1995).

The mid-day meal scheme is widely acknowledged to be one of the most successful schemes of the government. The scheme is operational in almost all the states in the country with a cooked mid-day meal being provided to all children in government and government aided primary and upper primary schools. It is the largest school lunch programme in the world. Dreze and Goyal (2003) noted that "it is remarkable that the act of cooking and serving food on the school premises, instead of giving take-home rations to the pupils, have major positive effects on school participation" (p.4675). Studies found that the scheme as instrumental in persuading parents to send their children to school in morning and attracting the children to stay in school. Further teachers also felt that mid-day meals make it easier to retain pupils after the lunch break (Dreze and Goyal, 2003).

In 2010-11, 7.18 crore primary school children and 3.36 crore upper primary school children were covered under the scheme. The children's coverage under the scheme in the States of Bihar (43 per cent), UP (57 per cent) and Jharkhand (58 per cent) is below the national average of 72 per cent, whereas it is above the national average in Chhattisgarh (83 per cent) and Odisha (82 per cent) (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2013).

The present paper makes an attempt to understand the strengths and the shortcomings of mid-day meal scheme. Is it widening the student participation in schools or not? What other kinds of discrimination it led to? The paper tried to understand this in the context of exclusion and caste based discrimination whereby it acted as a barrier to the Dalit attainment of the Right to Food.

## Strengths of Mid-day meal scheme

One of the most important contributions of mid-day meal scheme is to increase school enrolment. It also enhances pupil attendance on a daily basis and is instrumental in retaining them in the schools. It is believed that the school meals may also boost learning achievements. The studies suggested that the 'classroom hunger' limits the pupil's ability to concentrate and affects their learning skills too (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2013). A well-organised school meal has educational value. It can be used as an opportunity to inculcate different good habits among the children, like- washing one's hands before and after eating, and to familiarise them about the significance of clean water, hygiene and a balanced diet. Therefore, the three-fold benefits of the scheme were- substantial increase in enrolment in elementary schools, improvement in attendance and a decline in drop-

outs (The Times of India, 19 September 1982).

Mid-day meal scheme also fostered gender equality by reducing the gender gap in school participation. It also provided employment opportunities to female especially in rural areas and further liberated working women from the responsibility of feeding children at home during the day. The increased enrolment of students can be noticed in the case of Barmer District. Reetika Khera (2006) in a survey of 63 schools found that female enrolment at the primary level was 36% higher in September 2002 than in September 2001. Thus, mid-day meals positively impacted the school participation, particularly among the girls. Also, the PROBE reports notes "parents are not generally opposed to female education, but they are reluctant to pay for it. School meals could make a big difference here, by reducing the private costs of schooling" (Dreze and Goyal, 2003: 4676). In Karnataka, the guidelines specify that all cooks must be women, with preference given to widows.

Khera (2006) and Dreze and Goyal (2003) highlighted that mid-day meal play useful socialization roles, especially in India's class and caste ridden society. It helped the children to overcome traditional and social prejudices which restrict sharing meals with children from different caste and class backgrounds. In this way, it contributes to social equality.

It is important to note that in India, it is mainly the children from disadvantaged families who enrol in government schools. Dreze and Goyal (2003) observed that for the poorer strata of society, mid-day meals provide economic support, facilitating increased school participation among underprivileged children. This help in reducing future class inequalities, as lack of education play an important role in economic disadvantage and social marginalisation. Therefore, the mid-day meals scheme, by bringing the children especially from lower strata of society into the education system foster a great challenge to the prevalent social inequalities of caste, class and gender.

## Discrimination and Exclusion

One of the objectives of the mid-day meal was to overcome social inequality and caste barriers. It further aimed to bring together children from all castes and religions together by providing free lunch to all. However, the members of certain communities considered as 'impure and untouchable' often find themselves excluded and discriminated from the participation in government schemes. So, the mid-day meal scheme provided a platform for filling in this gap. But it does not seem to be working in this direction.

Studies such as, Dreze and Goyal (2003); Khera (2006) and Thorat and Lee (2006) showed that discrimination still exist in various parts of the country. They pointed out that discrimination within the mid-day meals takes on two forms: 'segregation of children during meal times on the basis of caste and; opposition to the appointment of Dalits as cooks'.

The segregation has negative effects on the fulfilment of the Right to Food. One of the important aspects that need attention is that the discrimination took place in the form of separate seating arrangements for Dalit and upper caste children. They did not sit together for lunch, thus, further creating the caste based divide. Also, there was distinction in the food served to the two communities altogether. The schools, in some cases employed two cooks- one from the dominant caste and one Dalit. Some schools also followed the practice of separate drinking water arrangements for the two. Therefore, it can be noted that school acted as an

agent in furthering this divide between the communities. However, it is quite interesting to note that in a study commissioned by the HRD Ministry on the mid-day meal scheme revealed that caste discrimination in serving food did not exist in caste-ridden states like Bihar, UP and MP but in Haryana and Karnataka (The Times of India, 6 August 2007).

Another form of prejudice and discrimination has been discussed by Dreze and Goyal (2003). In their study on Rajasthan, they pointed out that the parents of upper caste children often send their children with packed lunch or instructed them to come home for lunch, mainly to avoid their taking meal along with the lower caste children. Similarly, in some schools, the upper caste children were served food first and then it was distributed to lower caste children. Thus, this kind of segregation in schools restrict the Dalit children's right to education free from discrimination. This discrimination was not limited to children. In some cases the Dalit teachers were also segregated from the upper caste teachers in access to food and water during the lunch. Therefore, one of the objectives of mid-day meal to fill the caste based gap seemed to have failed. Along with this in some cases, it seemed to have strengthened the notion among children that 'untouchability' is both an 'accepted and necessary practice'.

Thorat and Lee (2006) pointed out physical space is an important factor to access food. In many places the programme was organized in such a way that it immediately restricted Dalit student's access to food. For instance, in two location in Tamil Nadu, the meals are provided in a temple, 'raising immediate questions of exclusion for Dalit children, who are generally forbidden entry into temples, as well as for other non-Hindu children' (Thorat and Lee, 2006).

Along with this, another objective of the scheme seemed to have failed. One of the aims of the scheme was to provide employment to the deprived section of society. But the discrimination can be seen in exclusion of lower caste cooks from cooking free lunch. The reason was that the Dalits are considered as 'polluted' and their cooking for the dominant caste consumption threatened the very basic nature of the caste system. Therefore, the food prepared by the Dalit was regarded as 'polluted' simply due to its contact with Dalit person. This resulted in upper caste parents opposing the scheme. It is difficult to divorce mid-day meal schemes from the contexts within which they operate. So, the upper caste parents opposed recruiting the Dalit cooks. Food cooked by Dalits and tribal cooks was often refused by many children or their parents. In this way, they forbid their children to consume food cooked by Dalit cooks. They further pressurised local administration to dismiss Dalit cooks. Another way of protesting was withdrawing the children where the Dalit were hired as cook and admitting them in school where the cook is not a Dalit. This can also be understood as 'a power struggle over livelihood rights' where the dominant caste try to restrict the Dalit economic aspirations. They view the Dalit economic independence as threatening to their traditional roles and therefore, react actively.

In 2006, Thorat and Lee studied discrimination against Dalits within the mid-day meal scheme and the Public Distribution System in Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. They found that areas with higher accessibility of Dalits witnessed less prejudice and exclusion. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh "higher proportions of the Dalits have secured employment as mid-day meal scheme cooks" (Thorat and Lee 2006:23).

Thus, it can be pointed out that, on one hand, it is expected that mid-day meal scheme will erode caste prejudices and class inequality but on the other hand, scheme is a tool of reinforcement rather than erosion of prevailing social inequalities.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the mid-day meal scheme was launched by the government of India with the noble intention of promoting universalisation of elementary education, providing free healthy cooked food to children, increasing attendance, lowering dropout rates, etc. It succeeded in many of these aspects. However, in some areas, the caste bias and segregation crept in, defeating the inherent motive of the scheme. In this the separate seating arrangement, segregated meals, unfavourable treatment in food allotment and the opposition to the Dalit cooks appeared to be the most problematic phenomenon.

In this regard, certain policies and approaches could be replicated for the successful working of the mid-day meal as discussed by Thorat and Lee (2006). These include, increasing the proportion and the mid-day meal centres in the Dalit localities. Efforts should also be made to promote the Dalit participation through hiring and promoting Dalit cooks and organizers. Also, the mid-day meal cooking positions should be reserved for the Dalits in places where there are resistance to the Dalits by the dominant caste community. The Dalit teachers should be promoted to organize and manage the mid-day meal. And various legal provisions should be strictly enforced against those who indulge in discrimination against Dalit children.

The need of the hour is that mid-day meals should continue and ensure that they are served with equality irrespective of religion, class, caste and gender.

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